State University of New York Press

Chapter Title: Tawba in the Nourishment of Hearts of Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī

Book Title: Repentance and the Return to God
Book Subtitle: Tawba in Early Sufism
Book Author(s): Atif Khalil
Published by: State University of New York Press. (2018)
Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/jj.18253963.11

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at https://about.jstor.org/terms

State University of New York Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Repentance and the Return to God*

This content downloaded from 108.181.177.59 on Sat, 02 Aug 2025 23:58:00 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

Chapter 7

Tawba in the *Nourishment of Hearts* of Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī

We shall bring our study of early Sufi approaches to *tawba* to a close with an analysis of repentance in the thought of Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī, one of the most influential authors of the early period. Dhahabī referred to him as a "leader (*imām*), ascetic (*zāhid*), and gnostic (*ʿārif*), the *shaykh* of the Sufis."[1] Unfortunately—as in the case of Muḥāsibī, who died a century and a half before him—little is known of Makkī's life. Richard Gramlich has lamented "the meager information that has come down to us with respect to the life of Abū Tālib."[2] Insofar as the details of his life are concerned, we can be more or less certain that he was born in the Persian province of Jibal and grew up in Mecca, where he studied under Ibn al-Aʿrābī (d. 952), a disciple of Junayd, as well as other Meccan masters.[3] According to Ibn Khallikān, it was because of his time in Mecca that he was given the attribution "al-Makkī."[4] He left Mecca for Basra sometime near the middle of the tenth century where, as noted earlier, he joined the Sālimiyya. It was here that he became heir to the spiritual teachings of Sahl al-Tustarī through the influence of Ibn Sālim's son, Abū al-Ḥasan Aḥmad b. Sālim. He later moved to Baghdad to study with Sarrāj,[5] and remained there until his death[6] in 996 CE. In his time, Makkī was known for his knowledge of *ḥadīth*, his public preaching, and his rigorous asceticism.[7] Although he is reported to have authored a number of works on *tawḥīd*,[8] none of them has survived. His most famous and influential treatise was the *Qūt al-qulūb*, a work widely read and studied to this day.

This content downloaded from 108.181.177.59 on Sat, 02 Aug 2025 23:58:00 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

Makkī's most comprehensive discussion of *tawba* appears in the thirty-second chapter of the *Qūt*. Running twenty pages in the lithograph edition, the chapter represents the longest single sustained treatment of repentance, written from a Sufi perspective, currently available to us from the first four centuries of Islam.[9] Besides the length of Makkī's chapter on *tawba*, one of the main reasons it should be given prominence in a study of this topic in early Sufism lies in the overall significance of the treatise of which it is a part. The *Qūt* was one of the most influential and widely read Sufi manuals in the formative period of the tradition. As Arberry observed, Makkī's magnum opus was, along with Qushayrī's *Risāla*, among the most valuable works of early Sufi literature.[10] When Rūmī (d. 1273) spoke of the Prophet Noah's high spiritual standing, one he had attained without book learning, he singled out the works of Makkī and Qushayrī. "He had not read the *Risāla* nor the *Qūt*," he wrote in the *Mathnawī*.[11] Although clearly intended as a criticism of mere book learning, the Persian mystic made his point by acknowledging the status of the *Qūt* among Sufis. Ibn ʿAbbād recorded his own praise for Makkī's work when he observed that "nothing else of its scope is available and I know of no one who has produced the likes of it. In it he sets forth the erudite sciences of Sufism [in a manner] which defies explanation."[12] Makkī's most notable influence was undoubtedly on Ghazālī, in whose *Iḥyāʾ* appear pages taken straight out of the *Qūt*.[13]

Makkī's discussion of repentance falls within a lengthy section of the *Qūt* devoted to the Stations of Certainty (*maqāmat al-yaqīn*). As we noted earlier, the Sufis differ on the number of these stations, as well as whether some of them are to be included instead among the *aḥwāl* or states. These stations, which, in Makkī's mystical theology, are nine in number, function as the rungs of a ladder that the spiritual aspirant must climb in his ascending journey to God. The inner growth and purification of the soul is not possible without traversing each of these stations and realizing their corresponding virtues. For Makkī, these stations are, in ascending order, repentance, patience, gratitude, hope, fear, renunciation, trust in God, contentment, and love.[14] The elaborate analysis of these stations makes up nearly a quarter of the entire *Qūt*, with the section on *tawakkul* by far the longest.[15]

The reader who comes to Makkī's text on repentance expecting to find a metaphysical exploration of this concept will be disappointed. Although the *Qūt* remains one of the most important works in the history of Islamic mysticism, it was meant to serve as an instruction manual for spiritual novices and aspirants. Makkī's intention in his *bāb*

This content downloaded from 108.181.177.59 on Sat, 02 Aug 2025 23:58:00 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

al-tawba is not to elucidate the transcendental mysteries of repentance[16] but to invite the seeker to properly situate himself in relation to his own transgressions against God, thereby preparing himself to acquire the other virtues necessary for inner growth, illumination, and progress on the path. Although the work is primarily a practical work, it is also by no means simply a book of Sufi commandments. Like Muḥāsibī before him, Makkī minutely examines the workings of the human psyche and draws attention to the various maladies of the heart.[17] He explores, like an astute psychoanalyst, the inner promptings of the soul that impel it in the directions of virtue and vice. In this regard, the *Qūt* can be read as a work both of ethical philosophy and spiritual psychology, even though its primary purpose is pragmatic. Still, a perceptive reader will be able to draw out the universal relevance of many of his inquiries into human nature. John Renard has not inaccurately described him as an "extraordinarily shrewd observer of the human condition."[18]

The more universal appeal of the *Qūt*, however, can be difficult to discern considering the degree to which the work is steeped in the language of the Islamic revelation. The reader of the *Qūt* will not help but notice the extent to which the Qurʾān interlaces its fabric. Not only does Makkī open each chapter with the relevant thematic verses, he returns to scripture for every subject he broaches. So deeply is the Qurʾān interwoven into the text, one might argue that the work is something of a *tafsīr* in a different key. Makkī's claim that "the people of the Qurʾān [. . .] are the people of God, and His elect"[19] gives us a sense of the central role of scripture in his system of ascetic and moral psychology. But this extreme reverence for Islam's primary text is not a peculiar characteristic of his unique brand of Sufism. As Schimmel has observed, "the words of the Koran have formed the cornerstone of all mystical doctrines [in Islam]."[20] By integrating the Qurʾān so deeply into the substance of the *Qūt*, Makkī is also able to forcefully argue for the legitimacy of his views of repentance in particular, and Sufism in general, through Revelation itself.[21] This employment of the sacred text should not be viewed simply as a strategy to win converts to Sufism, but reflects, as well, a genuine reverence and veneration for the message given to the Prophet of Islam, as well as the depth to which the Qurʾān was internalized by Makkī.

Makkī also uses Prophetic traditions extensively, although some critics, such as Ibn al-Kathīr (d. 1372), accused him of employing weak *ḥadīth*s[22]—unsurprisingly, the same charge he would also level against Ghazālī's *Iḥyāʾ*.[23] As we shall see in his discussion of repentance, Makkī

This content downloaded from 108.181.177.59 on Sat, 02 Aug 2025 23:58:00 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

frequently elaborates an idea using a *ḥadīth* as his starting point. He also heavily relies on Sufi sayings and anecdotes. This almost excessive use of quotations—from the Qurʾān, the Prophet, and the Sufis themselves—may be seen as a drawback, at least to the sensibilities of the modern reader accustomed to flowing, uninterrupted prose. One might get the impression that Makkī has simply strung together various sayings and divided them by subject headings. Knysh's contention that the *Qūt* "simply brims with long-winded quotations,"[24] is accurate, to a certain extent, and one can make a similar observation about other Sufi works composed around the same period. However, one should not forget that these compositions were among the first to systematically explicate Sufi ideas in Islamic history. Because the authors were transcribing teachings that were very often transmitted orally, it was only natural that some of these early works would be composed largely of the sayings of the earliest mystics and the Prophet insofar as they related to the path. Thus one will find that much of what Kalābādhī and Sarrāj have to say in the *Taʿarruf* and the *Kitāb al-lumaʿ*—texts authored around the same time period as the *Qūt* and that comprise, along with it, the first real "manuals" of Sufism—is quoted from earlier authorities. We must also recall, as we saw in chapter 4, the quasi-revelatory status that was assigned to many of the Sufi apothegmata, making later authorities more inclined to citing them.

Makkī's heavy reliance on quotations should not lead one to believe that the text is a haphazard string of Qurʾānic verses, prophetic traditions, and Sufi aphorisms. Although a superficial reading of the work might suggest that it is indeed, in the words of one scholar, "a rather unsystematic heap of quotations,"[25] a close analysis reveals that the quotations in fact serve as conceptual pegs that allow Makkī to ground and develop his own arguments. By basing his own views on those of his early predecessors, Makkī demonstrates to the reader that his positions are not simply personal opinions, but rooted in the Sufi tradition that he is representing. Although his treatment of material may appear to be unsystematic and even disorganized at times,[26] this does not mean that Makkī's various analyses in the *Qūt* lack, as a whole, a coherent structure. This becomes clear in Makkī's discussion of repentance, as the quotations that he employs serve to substantiate and legitimate a complex and psychological analysis of the soul as it undergoes a process of *tawba* and return to God. Makkī does not simply repeat the tradition to which he is heir, but engages it in a way that allows him to express his personal views. His own ideas can be unearthed by paying close attention to the progression of his discussions, and to the specific way

This content downloaded from 108.181.177.59 on Sat, 02 Aug 2025 23:58:00 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

he incorporates quotations into the chapter. This unearthing of Makkī's own views within the cluster of quotations, however, can often be difficult, and this difficulty is compounded by the fact that, in the lithograph edition, it is not always clear where a specific quotation ends.

The Obligatory Nature of *Tawba*

Makkī begins his discussion of *tawba* by highlighting its obligatory nature within the religious and spiritual life. "There is nothing more obligatory on creation," he writes, quoting Sahl, "than repentance."[27] *Tawba*, in Makkī's eyes, is not an optional act of religious devotion meant primarily for those who have committed themselves completely to God, but a requirement for the generality of believers. Unlike other expressions of religious piety, *tawba* is an essential and inescapable requirement for anyone who submits to Islam. Nor is repentance meant only for individual sins, but must, instead, be an all-embracing process of self-purification. Like Muḥāsibī and others, Makkī argues that the importance and value of *tawba* will be felt by the heedless soul only when the opportunity to repent is no more, and the soul is on the brink of final judgment. Makkī notes that according to one of the interpretations of the Qurʾānic verse, "a gulf is placed between them and what they desire" (Q 34:54), the object of desire is the repentance that is no longer possible at the moment of death. It is then that the soul will desire a *tawba* that it is incapable of attaining.[28] "*Tawba* is not for those who do wrong," he quotes the Qurʾān, "until when death attends one of them, he says, 'lo! I repent now!' " (Q 4:18). The soul's regret will be for neglecting to repent and reform itself while the opportunity was still present. Makkī writes, "He, most High, has decreed that repentance is not accepted after the signs of the next-world are made manifest (*ẓuhūr iʿlām al-ākhira*)."[29] Among the first of these signs is the appearance of the angel of death, the first epiphanic eruption from the world of the unseen.[30]

The Process and Conditions of *Tawba*

Makkī's analysis of the inner process of repentance yields significant insights into the inter-relation of the virtues within his psychological system. In this respect, his ideas bear a resemblance to Muḥāsibī's moral psychology. Ultimately, for Makkī, *tawba* cannot be separated from the other *maqāmāt* that the aspirant must go through in his journey to God.

This content downloaded from 108.181.177.59 on Sat, 02 Aug 2025 23:58:00 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

Although, as we shall see, it is most deeply connected to the virtues of patience and spiritual combat or inner struggle (*mujāhada*), there are other positive qualities that the soul will necessarily acquire, or be forced to acquire, in order for its process of repentance to be sound, just as there are vices above and beyond the particular sin or sins it is leaving that it will be necessary to abandon. *Tawba* is an all-consuming process that impels the soul in the direction of a fuller and more complete religious life.

Near the opening of his chapter, Makkī stipulates ten requirements for the repentance of individual sins. For much of his analysis of *tawba*, he elaborates, in one form or another, the implications of these requirements. An examination of the chapter reveals that many of his discussions can be drawn back to one or more of these conditions. Makkī emphasizes the importance of these conditions when he says that a close reading of the sayings of the earliest members of the Muslim community about repentance that have been transmitted to us will yield these ten conditions, and that the ones who came after them elaborated on these conditions. Only near the end of the chapter, when he begins to probe some of the higher levels of *tawba*, does Makkī go beyond these requirements. We will explore these further requirements at the end of our inquiry.

The ten conditions that Makkī states are incumbent upon the *tāʾib* are (1) not to repeat the sin, and (2) if tried by it, to avoid, at all costs, from falling back. There must be no persistence in the sin. The *tāʾib* must (3) return to God from the sin, as well as (4) feel regret (*nadam*) for what has been lost. (5) He must then vow or resolve to remain upright for the remainder of his life, (6) fear the punishment that is his due, but also (7) have hope in divine forgiveness. (8) He must acknowledge (*iʿtirāf*) that he has sinned, but also that (9) God has decreed the sin for him (*qaddara dhālika ʿalayhi*) and that this decree does not detract from His justice (*ʿadl*). (10) Finally, he must follow the sin with a righteous act as a penance or atonement (*kaffāra*) for his previous wrong.[31]

Although Makkī's discussion of repentance remains, as just noted, to a large extent an elaboration of these conditions, he does not set up or structure his discussion so that the reader can see that he is in fact expanding these conditions. Makkī's discussion lacks the relatively neat structure one finds, for example, in a work such as Ghazālī's *Iḥyāʾ*. The format of Makkī's analyses may be one reason why so few modern scholars have attempted to study the *Qūt*.[32] Only a diligent and patient reader can begin to appreciate the full import of the work. Because of the efforts Makkī takes to demonstrate the "orthodox" nature of Sufism, it is not surprising that he opens his analysis of *tawba* by stipulating the

This content downloaded from 108.181.177.59 on Sat, 02 Aug 2025 23:58:00 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

conditions outlined by the earliest generation of Muslims and then using them to develop his subsequent inquiry.

The Predetermination of the Sin

Makkī does not devote equal space to all of the conditions outlined above. He has next to nothing, for example, to say about the ninth condition, even though it remains one of the most problematic and disputed issues in Islamic theology and a serious point of contention between the Ashʿarites and Muʿtazilites.[33] The significance of this condition is moreover underscored by the fact that both Ghazālī and Ibn al-ʿArabī, in their chapters on *tawba* in the *Iḥyāʾ* and the *Futūḥāt*, devote significant attention to resolving the ethical dilemma raised by the religious imperative to repent for predetermined and divinely created sins.[34] One might even say that this question becomes the central problem in their respective analyses. We can only speculate as to why Makkī decides to overlook this issue altogether, with the exception of acknowledging in principle God's decree of the act. The reason seems to lie in the "*praxis*-oriented" or *ʿamalī* nature of the work, which holds Makkī back from plunging into theological debates that have very little bearing on the immediate needs of the spiritual seeker. Makkī's silence might be no different from that of the Buddha when he was confronted by metaphysical questions. The Buddha explained that for a man struck by an arrow, it is of little use for him to know trivial details about the archer and the arrow, details that would not alleviate his suffering or attend to the real problem at hand. The focus of an intelligent man would be on removing the arrow and treating the wound. For Makkī as well, theological inquiries in a chapter concerned fundamentally with *how to repent* may ultimately be seen as of little use for one trying to pull out the arrows of sin from his soul and healing the wound with the medicine of *tawba*.

Another related reason for his silence may have to do with a certain disdain for *kalām* altogether, which we know of on the basis of remarks he makes about partisans of scholastic theology in other parts of the *Qūt*. He quotes, for example, Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal approvingly in his criticisms of the *mutakallimūn*.[35] Although Ghazālī could also be critical of *kalām*, he did not shy away from deeply probing into such philosophical matters when occasion demanded it, even in his later post-conversion years. In the case of Makkī, he appears to have had an aversion to such debates altogether, and the rational methods employed to resolve them.

This content downloaded from 108.181.177.59 on Sat, 02 Aug 2025 23:58:00 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

Tawba and Resolve

The fifth condition Makkī highlights is particularly important in understanding the view he takes toward this *maqām*. Makkī stipulates that the repentant one must vow or resolve to remain upright until his death. In other words, he cannot truly be characterized by *tawba* as long as an effort is not made on his part to loosen the shackles of all sin and make a total commitment to obey God in all future matters. It would betray his sincerity if he were to repent of one sin while recklessly indulging in others. This is why Makkī says that the "reality of uprightness" demands of the *tāʾib* to "follow the path of the one who penitently turns (*sabīl man anāba*) to God."[36] This *ināba* must be complete and total, requiring the full commitment of the seeker. It is in this condition that we find what seems to be the most explicit requirement for the all-embracing character of repentance. Although Makkī nowhere states that God rejects the *tawba* of the sinner who repents of one sin but not others—as theologians such as the Muʿtazilite Abū Hāshim and Mānakdīm held[37]—he does appear to come close to this position by requiring a complete change in the person's life as part of the repentance process. This is reflected in the words of an anonymous *ʿālim* he quotes: "he who repented of ninety-nine sins while there remained a single sin for which he did not repent is not from among the repentant ones in our estimation."[38] Makkī's view of the all-consuming character of *tawba* is similar to that of Muḥāsibī, as we saw in the previous chapter.

Tawba and Regret

In his fourth condition of regret (*nadam*), Makkī is in agreement not only with the Sufis but with virtually the entire spectrum of theologians, from the Ashʿarites to the Muʿtazilites. If there is one condition about which there is consensus, it is regret. This consensus is no doubt rooted in one of the oft-repeated *ḥadīth*s about *tawba*, that regret is the sign of repentance. Makkī says the reality of the regret is that the sinner never returns to the likes of the sin that caused the regret. The regret, moreover, must be a deeply felt and perpetual sadness (*dawām al-ḥuzn*). "Among the signs of the sincerity [or truth] of repentance," he says, "are tenderness of heart and abundance of tears."[39]

For Makkī, the feeling of regret is made deeper by what the *tāʾib* should see as the magnitude of the offense, even though it may appear

This content downloaded from 108.181.177.59 on Sat, 02 Aug 2025 23:58:00 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

trite to others. Trivializing a sin is, according to one authority he cites, itself a major sin (*istiṣghār al-dhanb kabīra*). Although Makkī does not consider all sins to be major, as some held,[40] he does encourage the repenting one to see the weight of the misdeed insofar as it is an act of disobedience against God. By considering the sin to be trite, one in fact magnifies it on the scales, and conversely, by magnifying it in one's own eyes, one diminishes its weight on the scales.[41] Despite the subjectivity of this approach to sin, Makkī still divides sins into the major and minor, a classification that, in his view, remains independent of one's orientation toward sin. Nevertheless, Makkī does seriously warn the *tā'ib* against belittling his offense, as small as it may be in the eyes of the Law, because, as God warned one of his friends, "do not look at the insignificance of the wrong, but the magnificence of the One you face on its account."[42] This emphasis is not dissimilar, as we saw in the previous chapter, to Muḥāsibī's exhortation for the *tā'ib* to consider his previous good deeds to be insignificant.[43]

Tawba and Overcoming the Inclination to Repeat the Sin

One of the ways to ensure the feeling of regret does not subside is for the aspirant to continuously remember his sins. This will create a feeling of humility before God. But Makkī also sees the need to occasionally turn away from the memory of the sin if such a memory has an adverse effect on the *tā'ib*. If he finds that by calling the sin to mind he feeds a renewed desire for it, Makkī suggests abstaining from the recollection altogether. This is because such a remembrance defeats its intended purpose, which is to deepen the experience of *tawba* by intensifying the regret. Makkī does not dogmatically take the position that repentance requires of the beginner to remember his sin in all circumstances. Instead, like a true doctor of the soul, he administers medicine according to the illness of the *tā'ib*. Acknowledging the danger in remembering one's sins, Makkī writes:

> Know that the one who is weak in certainty and of strong lower soul (*nafs*), is not safe, when he remembers his sins, from feeling a passion (*shahwa*) for them when he looks at them with his heart, or to incline towards them with his lower soul, experiencing a sense of sweetness (*ḥalāwa*). And this can become the cause for his [renewed] temptation.[44]

This content downloaded from 108.181.177.59 on Sat, 02 Aug 2025 23:58:00 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

An individual of this kind should therefore avoid remembering past wrongs, because "cutting off the causes of sin is safer, and what is safer for the aspirant is better for him."[45] Since the desire for the sin and the sweetness the individual derives from it are sources of the sin, the *tāʾib* must make it a priority to eliminate such internal forces that draw him back to the direction he is turning away from, even if it requires adopting a course of action that might diminish the experience of regret and humility.

Although Makkī's concern with eliminating the soul's passionate desire (*shahwa* and *hawā*) for the sin, along with the sweetness (*ḥalāwa*) it experiences upon thinking about it, is guided by a desire to protect the sinner from repeating the offense, he also sees intrinsic value in their elimination. The presence of these qualities within the individual signifies a level of incompleteness within the *tawba* process. If *shahwa*, *hawā*, and *ḥalāwa* are present, the aspirant has only outwardly turned away from the sin. But since *tawba*—insofar as it is a return to God and obedience from disobedience—must encompass both the outward and inward dimensions of the human being, the inward inclination to sin must also be cut off. The traces of the passion for the sin, as well as the sweetness the unregenerate soul feels when it considers it, must be eradicated. To highlight this point, Makkī cites the sayings of some of the earlier Sufis: "The *tawba* of the servant [of God] is not sound until he forgets his passions [for sin];"[46] "One of the signs of the sincerity of the *tāʾib* is that the sweetness of passion (*hawā*) be replaced by the sweetness of obedience;"[47] "The servant [of God] is not a *tāʾib* until the sweetness of conforming to the lower self is replaced by the bitterness of opposing it."[48]

But Makkī also understands how difficult it can be to eliminate these internal inclinations. The difficulty in self-purification is compounded by the fact that such urges and inclinations are rooted in human nature, within the very elemental makeup of the human being. Makkī recounts Sahl al-Tustarī's response upon being asked about the man who repents and leaves a particular sin, but who then experiences a sense of sweetness when the thought of it crosses his mind, or when he sees or hears about it. "The sweetness [he finds] is a natural disposition of the human being" (*al-ḥalāwa ṭabʿ al-bashariyya*), Sahl responds, adding:

> There is no escape from it, except if he lifts his heart towards his Lord in complaint, by rejecting it within his heart, holding fast to the rejection (*inkār*) and not parting from it, and praying to God that He make him forget it and that He preoccupy him with His own remembrance and worship.[49]

This content downloaded from 108.181.177.59 on Sat, 02 Aug 2025 23:58:00 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

Although Makkī acknowledges, in conformity with Sahl, that the inner inclination is a part of human nature, the *tāʾib* is still obliged to strive against it. "Repentance is not sound," writes Makkī, "as long as passion [for it] remains" (*maʿa baqāʾ al-shahwa*).[50] The *tāʾib* is called to subjugate those impulses which, though part of his nature, draw him to sin. Though Makkī does not explicitly state it, the elimination of these traits help to ensure the *tāʾib* will remain true to the first, second, third, and fifth conditions stipulated earlier, namely that (1) he not repeat the sin; (2) that if tried by the sin, he avoids it at all costs; and (3) that he return to his Lord completely. Eradicating the root cause of the sin helps him fulfill (5) his resolve to remain upright afterward.

The way to strive against these inclinations is through struggle (*mujāhada*) and patience (*ṣabr*), the second station on Makkī's schema of *maqāmāt*. By tying in the qualities of struggle and patience to the process of repentance, Makkī illustrates the unity and inter-relation of the virtues in his mystical psychology. In the passage below, he argues that the eradication of the passions that attract one to the sin is essential for the completion of *tawba*. As long as these passions remain, there remains a latent danger of the *tāʾib* falling back into the sin. Makkī writes:

> The best thing that a servant can do is cut off the passions of the lower soul. This is sweeter to him than what desire (*hawā*) offers because its passions (*shahawāt*) have nothing in truth to offer that one might anticipate later, just like they have nothing in the beginning that can be traced [i.e., because they are fleeting]. If he does not cut them off there will be for him no end to them. If on the other hand he preoccupies himself with what he dislikes by more deeply immersing himself in acts of obedience (*mazīd al-ṭāʿāt*), he will find a sweetness in his worship. But if he does not, he should adhere to patience and struggle. This is the way of the truthful ones (*ṣādiqīn*) from among the aspirants (*murīdīn*). It has been said, about His words, Most High, "Seek help from God and be patient" (Q 7:128), that they mean, seek help from Him in your worship and be patient in your struggle against disobedience.[51]

Struggle and patience are therefore necessary components for the completion of *tawba* insofar as they help the *tāʾib* eliminate lingering inclinations to repeat the offense. By diligently submitting himself to religious acts of worship and self-denial, he will eventually come to find

This content downloaded from 108.181.177.59 on Sat, 02 Aug 2025 23:58:00 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

his obedience to God, which he previously abhorred, sweet. Even if the signs of this sweetness remain nowhere in sight, he must nevertheless persist in *ṣabr* and *mujāhada* until his persistence bears fruit.

One of the ways to prevent the inclination to sin from arising within the heart is by cutting off its internal sources. For Makkī, the stages that lead one to the sin begin with the "incoming evil thought" of the act (*khāṭir al-sūʾ*).[52] This is the first step toward transgression. The safest course is for the *tāʾib* to block it as soon as it appears, before it grows into an "[evil] whispering of the soul" (*waswās al-nafs*), and the whispering into a more powerful and potentially irresistible source of seduction:

> The aspirant should work to eliminate the whisperings of the soul (*waswās al-nafs*) which prompt him to sins (*khaṭāyā*),[53] otherwise he will fall into them. This is because the [errant] thoughts (*khawāṭir*) grow strong and become whisperings. And if the whisperings multiply, they become inroads (*ṭuruq*) for the Enemy through the embellishment and seduction of sin. The most harmful thing for the *tāʾib* is to establish the evil thought in his heart by paying attention to it, since it leads him to his own destruction. Every cause that induces one to disobedience, or calls one's attention to disobedience, is itself an act of disobedience. And every cause that eventually leads one to carry out the sin is itself a sin, even if it is legally permissible (*mubāḥ*). Cutting off the permissible act in such a case is an act of worship. This is from among the subtleties of acts (*daqāʾiq al-aʿmāl*).[54]

Makkī traces the inception of the sin back to its first thought. Although the *khāṭir* is weak and insignificant in its own right, it is the seed for the transgression. If watered by the attention of the heart, it will grow into a passion until the passion eventually manifests itself externally in the form of an act.[55] The seed must therefore be unearthed from the heart as soon as it is planted by the winds of fate, so no possibility of disobedience remains.[56] Unlike the *wārid*, the *khāṭir* can be either a source of good or evil.[57]

The last part of the passage is reminiscent of Muḥāsibī's injunction to abandon even permissible enjoyments in order to safeguard one from lapsing in his resolve. Like Muḥāsibī before him, Makkī is acutely aware of the potential of permissible acts or sources of pleasure to change,

This content downloaded from 108.181.177.59 on Sat, 02 Aug 2025 23:58:00 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

under certain circumstances, into causes of sin.[58] If the *tāʾib* becomes aware of this danger, what is typically allowed by the Law becomes, in his particular case, objectionable.[59] Through a process of *murāqaba* and self-reflection, the *tāʾib* should strain to identify the subtlest causes for his disobedience to God and then strive to uproot them from his soul.[60] Insofar as the intention behind this effort remains to overcome the propensity and inclination to sin, the entire process of self-examination and taming the lower soul becomes a form of *ʿibāda*.

On Effortlessly Abandoning the Sin

Even though Makkī considers struggling against the inclination to sin to be laudable, and a proof of the *tāʾib*'s sincerity, the penitent soul who is able to renounce the sin without much exertion, has, in his eyes, a loftier standing before God.[61] This is because the absence of such struggle (*tanāzuʿ*/*mujāhada*) on his part reflects a higher level of purity and the presence of a submissive lower soul, at least in relation to the particular sin in question. The position Makkī takes on this particular matter was not, however, as he points out, shared by all of the early Sufis. He notes that they were divided over the question of whether the individual who had to struggle against a particular sin held a loftier position, in the eyes of God, or the one who was able to leave the sin without much effort.[62] Ibn Abī al-Ḥawārī (d. 844–845)[63] and the companions of Abū Sulaymān al-Dārānī held that the former held a higher position because he would be rewarded both for his *tawba* and his *mujāhada*. The one who did not have to struggle, on the other hand, received only the reward for abandoning the sin. In their eyes, the temptation to sin was not itself blameworthy. Rabāḥ b. ʿAmr al-Qaysī (d. 767),[64] however, as Makkī notes, and with whom he agrees, argued that the one whose lower soul puts up no resistance because "of a sign from the signs of certainty and repose" (*shāhid min shawāhid al-yaqīn wa al-ṭumaʾnīna*[65]) has a higher standing. He is less likely to fall back into the sin considering the temptation to return is, in his case, altogether absent. The one who has to struggle against his inclination is not safeguarded from returning.[66] This debate was similar to another one, notes Makkī, regarding whether the individual who had to struggle to give charity in the way of God was more virtuous than the one who was generous without effort.[67] Ibn ʿAṭāʾ and his companions held that the former was in a better position since he would receive two rewards, one for his efforts and the other for his

This content downloaded from 108.181.177.59 on Sat, 02 Aug 2025 23:58:00 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

charity. Junayd, on the other hand, argued that the latter held a higher station because his effortless generosity (*sakhāwa*) was the fruit of *zuhd*. His generosity meant that he had already acquired a positive character trait that was wanting in the case of the former, whose struggle against worldly attachments signified he had not yet attained the same rank.[68]

For Makkī, although the struggle in the case of both individuals in the examples above is commendable, the one who is able to perform virtuous acts without internal impediments is more spiritually advanced, more secure from the sin, and therefore closer to God. We can presume that for Makkī such a person has already gone through, at some earlier stage in his life, the struggle that has brought him to the station at which he now stands. This remains merely speculative, however, because Makkī does not explicitly state it. Although Makkī's stance in this debate is, on the whole, persuasive, he does not address the question of the person who is able to renounce the sin, not because he has reached a level of self-mastery as a consequence of subjecting himself to a regimen of ascetic training and spiritual exercise (*riyāḍa*), but because of a peculiar God-given temperament. In this case, the position of Ḥawārī and Dārānī's companions would appear more convincing. It would make little sense for God to deprive the *tā'ib* who struggles to overcome a certain sin of a reward, while He rewards the one who does not have to struggle simply because he is born with an innate disinterest in the vice, or a weaker passion for it. In fact, he might, one could argue, be more accountable for falling into the sin to begin with. A person who has a strong appetite for food, for example, a characteristic he is born with, should not receive, one would think, a lesser reward for keeping a gluttonous impulse in check than the one who eats little because he lacks such cravings to begin with. Although it is unclear how Makkī would respond to these particular scenarios, because he does not address them, at least in his chapter on *tawba*, his general position, as already mentioned, is to privilege abandoning a sin or vice without exertion and inner resistance.

What is perhaps most interesting about this aspect of Makkī's discussion, as brief as it is, is that it reflects the more universal significance of some of the issues being addressed in early Sufism. A similar question as the one touched on in the *Qūt* was dealt with by some of the leading philosophers in the West,[69] starting primarily with Aristotle. In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle argued that a person could not be characterized by a particular virtue if the performance of that virtue did not come easily to him. In order to possess the virtue in question, the

This content downloaded from 108.181.177.59 on Sat, 02 Aug 2025 23:58:00 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

individual had to genuinely enjoy and find pleasure in it. There had to be an inner attraction for the virtue and a corresponding repulsion from the opposing vice for him to be qualified by the exemplary character trait.[70] For Aristotle, a man could not be called courageous if he felt fear in the face of circumstances that required bravery, or did not delight in acts of courage. Generosity, likewise, required that one found selflessness and munificence enjoyable. Thus he wrote that "moral excellence is concerned with pleasures and pains."[71] If one did not experience joy in a particular virtue, he would be required to train himself, in Aristotle's view, until he found it enjoyable. A virtue had to be learned in the same way as a craft or a particular art, through practice and repetition. He argued that just as men become builders by practicing the craft of building, or lyre players by continuously playing the lyre, "so too we become just by doing just acts, temperate by doing temperate acts, brave by doing brave acts."[72] The learning of virtues, however, did not consist of acquiring a theoretical knowledge of them, or mastering their external forms, but of habituating the soul to find them pleasurable. Virtue was therefore something that had to be acquired through practice and repetition. It would be inappropriate to characterize someone as virtuous who was undergoing a process of habituation just as one could not be a called a craftsman until he learned the particular craft in question.

Aristotle's understanding of the ideal virtuous man is not entirely different from the realized Sufi in Makkī's thought, at least in relation to the question of the soul's inclination and attraction to what is virtuous. Just as for Aristotle the ethically accomplished man finds it pleasurable to do all that is good, the advanced Sufi, for Makkī, finds obedience to God pleasant. His soul is so trained through *mujāhada* that what he may have found to be difficult at the onset of his spiritual journey comes effortlessly near the end, and becomes a source of inner joy. The "spiritual athleticism" that he has undergone, and that has brought him to his present state, is, in many ways, similar to the habituation Aristotle speaks of. Both the virtuous man and the ideal Sufi possess a purity of soul actualized through laborious practice. The performance of good deeds, and the avoidance of evil ones, is second nature to both of them, ingrained into the substance of their beings. For both Makkī and Aristotle, it is not enough simply to know a virtue, or to practice it with a heart that delights in its exact opposite. The one who strives to attain ethical or spiritual perfection must actualize the latent goodness of his soul, so that it comes to find all that is morally good to be sweet, and all that is evil to be repugnant.

This content downloaded from 108.181.177.59 on Sat, 02 Aug 2025 23:58:00 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

Despite these similarities, however, for Makkī the performance of a good act without struggle does not mean that the act itself cannot be considered virtuous or good. If someone is grudgingly generous, he is still generous because of the effort he makes to do what is commendable. Aristotle, we know, would have disagreed. In his view, such a man would simply be on his way to acquiring the virtue. He was habituating himself—as he should—to eventually find it pleasant, even though he could not yet be properly qualified by it. Insofar as they both consider the one who does what is good without struggle to stand at a higher rank of ethical and spiritual development, Aristotle and Makkī are in agreement, just as they are about the thoroughly lamentable state of the one who is repelled by virtue and makes no effort to pursue it.

A slightly different perspective on this question of inner inclination and virtue was articulated in the Western philosophical tradition by Immanuel Kant.[73] He presents the case of a man who on account of some personal sorrow "which extinguishes all sympathy for the plight of others"[74] manages to show them benevolence out of duty to the good. This act, in Kant's eyes, has more moral worth than the kindness shown by a man naturally disposed to such sympathetic conduct, who acts simply on account of a good tempered and congenial predilection. For the German philosopher, it is not the inclination and feeling to do what is good that makes an act morally commendable, but carrying it out solely out of a sense of duty to the "categorical imperatives" of the universal moral law.[75] The ideal scenario is of a man who carries it out against inner resistance with no personal benefit. For Kant only then can one know that it is accomplished out of a sense of duty and not mere feeling.[76] Insofar as Kant presents the man who struggles against his own urge to do what is right as a model of virtue, his view comes close to the one that Makkī attributes to Ḥawārī and Dārānī's disciples, when they argue that the *tā'ib* who leaves a sin with struggle is superior to the one who leaves it without exertion. The struggle to do what is right signals for both Kant and this group of Sufis the seriousness of the agent's commitment to what is morally right.

What we can gather from this comparison is the universal significance of many of the debates that were taking place in early Sufism and that are addressed in the *Qūt*. The Sufis were not simply concerned with issues unique to their own community but with ethical questions that had broad relevance and could be intelligible to those outside of Muslim civilization. Even though the vocabulary of these debates was, for the most part, derived from Islamic Revelation, it is not impossible

This content downloaded from 108.181.177.59 on Sat, 02 Aug 2025 23:58:00 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

to extrapolate the universal import of these debates from their specific religious and cultural context.

Tawba Followed by Righteous Deeds

In the tenth condition, as we saw earlier, Makkī stipulates that the *tāʾib* must follow the sin with a righteous act as a penance or expiation (*kaffāra*) for his previous wrong. His general discussion of this theme centers on the broader concept of *iṣlāḥ* (setting things aright). As we saw in the second chapter, this concept is deeply tied to *tawba* in the Qurʾān. It should not come as a surprise, then, considering the scriptural roots of Makkī's analysis, that he should devote considerable attention to the theme of rectification and following the sin with pious acts.

The regret for the sin, in Makkī's eyes, if it is genuine, will naturally lead the *tāʾib* not only to turn away from it, but to pursue good works in its wake.[77] The most important of these works is for him to preoccupy himself with amending wrongs (*al-ishtighāl bi al-iṣlāḥ*).[78] Like Muḥāsibī before him, Makkī argues that the rectification should correspond to the sin.[79] Thus, for theft—to use a straightforward example—*tawba* requires returning the stolen property; for *nifāq* (hypocrisy), it requires *ikhlāṣ* (sincerity). Each group of sinners has conditions unique to its repentance: "it is necessary," writes Makkī, "that the *tawba* of the servant be the [moral] opposite of his disobedience" (*ʿan ḍidd maʿāṣīhi*) and "contrary to the corruption he was responsible for."[80] The *fasād* introduced by the transgression must be corrected by an *iṣlāḥ* peculiar to the nature of the sin. The corresponding rectification, moreover, is not only qualitative, since *tawba* requires "some [good] deeds for some [evil] deeds, and many [good] deeds for many [evil] deeds."[81]

The hope of the *tāʾib* in performing good works following his sin should be that God include him in the category of those lauded in Q 25:70: "Except for him who repents and believes and does right, as for such, God will transmute (*yubaddilu*) their evil deeds into good deeds."[82] This transmutation (*tabdīl*) is, for Makkī, the fruit of genuine *tawba*. When the *tāʾib* exerts to change his state, keeping in mind that "God does not change the condition of a people until they change what is within themselves" (Q 13:11), he will receive divine succor in the form of *tabdīl*. The transmutation the verse speaks of takes place in the world as a consequence of the efforts on his part. Although some exegetical authorities understood this transmutation to be a reward that the *tāʾib*

This content downloaded from 108.181.177.59 on Sat, 02 Aug 2025 23:58:00 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

receives in the next world for *tawba* in this world, Makkī explicitly denies this interpretation. Following the opinion of Ibn ʿAbbās, Mujāhid, Qatāda, and Ḥasan, Makkī writes that "the transmutation occurs in this world."[83] This interpretation underscores the importance of good works that must immediately follow the sin.

One of the reasons Makkī places so much emphasis on following evil deeds with good deeds (*tabdīl*) is that in his view the initial sin was itself a perversion of a divine blessing (*niʿma*) into something reprehensible. The sinner employed divine gifts such as health, wealth, or prosperity to commit an offense against God.[84] By transmuting the *niʿma* into a source of disobedience against the Benefactor, the sin represents an act of supreme ingratitude, or what Makkī calls *kufr al-niʿma*.[85] The blessing was bestowed on the servant so that through it he may seek to acquire greater bounties. But "if he used these blessings to disobey God, he transmuted them in ingratitude" (*qad baddalahā kufran*). Makkī bases his view on two Qurʾānic verses: "They transmuted (*baddalū*) the blessing of God in ingratitude" (Q 14:28); and "He who transmutes (*yubaddil*) the blessing of God, after it has come to him. (For him) Lo! God is severe in punishment" (Q 2:211). The *tabdīl* of which these verses speak, argues Makkī, is of transforming the gifts of God into sources of sin and corruption. This explains the severity of divine punishment.[86]

Insofar as every sin is at root a transmutation of good into evil—a *fasād*, the very opposite of *iṣlāḥ*—*tawba* cannot be complete without a *tabdīl* through *iṣlāḥ*, a rectifying inversion that restores the moral order ruptured by the act of disobedience. This is why Makkī says that "the servant is not a *tāʾib* until he is a *muṣliḥ*."[87] Moreover, just as all sin is a *tabdīl* of good into evil, all good works that follow the sin, even those that are not directly related to it, can be considered, in a more general sense, as forms of *iṣlāḥ*. Although the *tāʾib* needs to give the particular rectification for the sin priority, *iṣlāḥ* need not to be restricted to the narrow meaning or idea of correcting the wrong most directly and immediately related to the offense. It can refer to any range of good works that he strives to perform after the sin, to set aright the process he initiated when he turned good into evil. In this light, all of his good work can be subsumed under the larger effort to amend wrongs. Since every sin is a *fasād*, every good deed ensuing from *tawba* is an *iṣlāḥ*. This idea, as we saw in chapter 2, is deeply Qurʾānic. Iṣfahānī observes this when he notes that the opposite of *iṣlāḥ* in the Qurʾān tends to be either *fasād*, or *sayyiʾa*—sin itself.[88]

This content downloaded from 108.181.177.59 on Sat, 02 Aug 2025 23:58:00 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

The Categories of *Tāʾibūn*

At the end of his chapter, Makkī turns his attention to the various classes or levels of *tāʾibūn*. As we saw in the fourth chapter, these levels are often divided in Sufi literature into the triadic scheme of commoners (*al-ʿawāmm*), the elect (*al-khawāṣṣ*), and the elect of the elect (*khāṣṣ al-khawāṣṣ*). In this hierarchy, everyday believers stand at the lowest rung of the ladder, and the gnostics and the most realized of Sufis at the summit.[89] Sometimes the contrast is simply between two groups of the *khawāṣṣ* and the *ʿawāmm*, the Sufis and the common lot of Muslims. The purpose behind these comparisons is typically to demonstrate the difference between a virtue understood at the level of average religious experience and through the lens of mystical annihilation in God. The contrast is usually striking because it presents a conceptualization of the virtue based on a mystical awareness that subverts or at the very least goes beyond commonsense notions of the virtue in question. When more than one class is compared, the intermediary class or classes represent an embodiment of the virtue standing somewhere in between the pietistic and the mystical. Some examples of these classifications in relation to *tawba* are expressed in the following sayings, some of which we cited earlier: "the common people repent of their sins while the Sufis repent of their good deeds;"[90] "what a difference there is between the *tāʾib* who repents of slips, the one who repents of moments of heedlessness, and the one who repents of witnessing his good deeds;"[91] and, "the masses (*al-ʿāmma*) seek forgiveness for sins, the elect (*al-khāṣṣa*) seek forgiveness for witnessing the acts, and for witnessing the gifts and graces, while the great ones (*al-akābir*) seek forgiveness for witnessing everything other than the Real."[92] One of the most famous of these sayings on the question of the sins of the commoners and the elect is attributed to Rābiʿa. A man once came to her and said, "I have not sinned for so many years," to which she replied "your existence is a sin the like of which there is no other" (*wujūduka dhanb lā yuqās bihā dhanb*).[93]

Although sayings of this kind are occasionally encountered in the *Qūt*, Makkī does not explore them in much detail, and certainly not to the extent one would find in those works that have as their principle goal the explication of the most advanced of mystical teachings. For the most part, the *Qūt* examines the Sufi virtues from a religious and psychological perspective in a manner that is not much different from that of the writings of Muḥāsibī or other Sufi primers. It should come

This content downloaded from 108.181.177.59 on Sat, 02 Aug 2025 23:58:00 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

as no surprise, then, that in his categorization of *tāʾibūn*, his analysis does not extend beyond the moral and religious plane. Even those most vehemently opposed to all forms of mysticism would have little reason to object to Makkī's four levels, each of which corresponds, in the eyes of the author, to a soul described or at least alluded to in the Qurʾān.

The Four Levels

The first kind of person, for Makkī, is the one who turns away from sins immediately after he falls into them. He does not incline toward them afterward because of the uprightness of his *tawba* and purity of his character, and he replaces his previous transgressions with righteous acts. Because of the fullness of his return to God in the wake of each slip, his repentance is always *tawba naṣūḥ*. Although Makkī does not describe the nature of the sins this person falls into, his soul stands at the level of the *al-nafs al-muṭmaʾinna* or *al-nafs al-rāḍiya* praised in Q 89:27.[94]

The second kind of individual is the one who returns to God after his sins, resolves to remain upright, and does not concern or preoccupy himself with thinking about his transgressions either with the purpose of lapsing in his repentance or because of a sweetness he finds in them. Despite the merit of his *tawba*, he is nevertheless tried by sins that he may occasionally fall into but without intending them beforehand (*ʿan ghayr qaṣad*). The sins that he is tried by, argues Makkī, are in a sense inevitable because their origin lies in the specific constitution of the human being, a unique makeup that derives from the range of elements found in the earth. The tests faced by the faithful who occupy this class are directly the result of the human constitution. This truth, for Makkī, is evinced by the thematic sequence of Q 76:2—"Lo! We created man from a drop of mingled fluid to try him (*nabtalīhi*)"—which addresses the inevitability of trial (*ibtilāʾ*) immediately after calling to mind the heterogonous nature of the human constitution. It is for this reason Makkī argues that the Qurʾān says "do not ascribe purity to yourselves" (Q 53:32), and the Prophet said, "the believer is tried and oft-repenting" (*al-muʾmin muftan tawwāb*),[95] without ascribing complete purity to the believers. Although the first group of *tāʾibūn* are also invariably tested by the sins that have their origin in the human composition, we can presume that in the eyes of Makkī they are less likely to fall into them than this group, and that if they do, they return to God with a *tawba* that is more perfect.

This content downloaded from 108.181.177.59 on Sat, 02 Aug 2025 23:58:00 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

For Makkī, the sins that this second group falls into are the "small faults" that the Qurʾān speaks of in 53:32: "Those who avoid the enormities of sin and the abominations (*kabāʾir al-ithm wa al-fawāḥish*), except the unwilled offenses/small faults (*al-lamam*)." There seems to be some ambiguity, however, regarding whether this group can fall into *fawāḥish* because he quotes another verse that for him speaks of their ideal response to these sins: "And those who when they fall into an abomination (*fāḥisha*), or wrong themselves, remember God and seek forgiveness for their sins" (Q 3:135). Despite this ambiguity, what does seem clear is those who stand at this level of spiritual development avoid the major sins, and the slips that they fall into are not preceded by resolution or *mens rea*, a premeditated intention. Their *tawba*, though commendable, falls short in relation to the first group but surpasses the third group. The soul of the *tāʾib* who stands at this level is the *nafs al-lawwāma*, the self-reproaching soul of Q 75:2.

The third kind of person "sins, then repents, then returns to the sin, then is saddened on account of his intention to sin, his striving toward it, and his choosing it over obedience."[96] Although he has a propensity to postpone *tawba*, he nevertheless desires it but fails because of the strength of his lower soul. He admires the ranks of *tawwābīn* and the *ṣiddiqīn*, but his passion tends to get the better of him. Since the strength of his sinful habits holds him back from freeing himself from them, his *tawba* is lost from time to time. For Makkī, "he has mixed a good deed with an evil deed. It may be that God will forgive him."[97] The sinner of this class is stranded between two potential states: he may incline toward *tawba* out of his reverence for God, or he may fall prey to the inclinations of his entrenched habits and passions. Because of his inability to consistently return in *tawba*, his soul is self-deceived and beguiled (*wa nafs hādhā hiya al-musawwala*). Although the Qurʾān does not speak of a *nafs al-musawwala*, it does use the second form of the verbal root **s-w-l** on four occasions, and in each one to describe either Satan's wiles or self-deception.[98] The idea of a *nafs al-musawwala* therefore has scriptural basis, even though it is not as explicitly singled out in the Qurʾān in the same way as the other three well-known souls (of the first, second, and fourth groups).

The fourth kind of person is the most lackadaisical in matters pertaining to *tawba*. He "sins, then follows his sin with a similar or even greater one, persists in it, and resolves to commit it to the extent he is able. He does not intend repentance nor uphold uprightness." Such an

This content downloaded from 108.181.177.59 on Sat, 02 Aug 2025 23:58:00 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

individual does not even "hope for the Promise of reward (*al-waʿd*) by thinking good [of his Lord], nor does he fear the Threat of punishment (*al-waʿīd*)."[99] The soul of this person commands it to evil (*wa nafs hādhā hiya al-ammāra*). One should fear for this person an evil end (*sūʾ al-khātima*). Though a believer, his ultimate fate lies in the hands of God. He belongs to the class of "profligate sinners" (*fāsiqūn*) and is to be included, for Makkī, among those who "await God's decree" (Q 9:106).

A Comparison with the Classifications of Muḥāsibī and Ghazālī

Makkī's fourfold classification of *tāʾibūn* bears a few resemblances to the threefold classification of the believers in their "quest for godfearingness" (*ṭalab al-ṭaqwā*) that appears in the *Riʿāya*,[100] and which ʿAbd al-Ḥalīm Maḥmūd used to classify the levels of the *tāʾibūn* in Muḥāsibī's thought.[101] While we cannot be certain that Makkī was directly influenced by Muḥāsibī in the construction of his fourfold scheme, we cannot entirely discount the possibility. It is not out of the question that in his tetradic classificatory scheme Makkī was simply expanding Muḥāsibī's triadic one found in the *Riʿāya*. As far as similarities go, the first and last groups for both Makkī and Muḥāsibī are virtually identical: the first in the promptness, purity, and completeness of their *tawba*, and the last in their total neglect of it. The only difference is that, for Muḥāsibī, those who belong to this group entertain the delusion of a good end, while for Makkī they are not much concerned, despite a nominal profession of faith, with their final state. The second class of pious believers in both schemes is also very similar: they constantly strive to ward off sin, promptly return to God in the aftermath of each slip, and struggle in their efforts to obey Him in all circumstances. Makkī and Muḥāsibī both cite the words of the Prophet to describe the believer who stands at this level, that he is "tried and oft-repenting" (*muftan tawwāb*).[102] If Makkī was employing Muḥāsibī's classification, he simply added another level to accommodate believers who, although of good intention, were less devout in their religious commitments. Muḥāsibīs's threefold division could have appeared, for Makkī, too restrictive to encompass the range of potential believer types.[103] Although a Muḥāsibīan influence insofar as the unique and peculiar features of his scheme are concerned is absent in Makkī (none of the nine Qurʾānic verses and *ḥadīth*s he uses to describe the levels of believers, for example, is quoted by Makkī, with the excep-

This content downloaded from 108.181.177.59 on Sat, 02 Aug 2025 23:58:00 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

tion of the one cited above), when we consider the conceptual overlaps between the two schemes, as well as Makkī's incorporation of elements of the *Riʿāya* into the *Qūt* in other places,[104] at least some measure of Mūḥāsibīan influence cannot be entirely ruled out.

What is indisputable, however, is that Ghazālī's fourfold classification of *tāʾibūn* in his *Kitāb al-tawba* of the *Iḥyāʾ* is virtually a replication of Makkī's scheme.[105] Not only are most of the Qurʾānic verses and *ḥadīth*s Makkī brings to his discussion cited by Ghazālī, he even integrates Makkī's peculiar expressions into what becomes a slightly expanded—and clearer—analysis of the various groups, structured as a running commentary on Makkī's analysis. Some of the ambiguities in Makkī's schema are clarified by Ghazālī, such as the relation of the second group to "abominations." Ghazālī says that they avoid the "major sins from among the abominations (*kabāʾir al-fawāḥish*)" even though they may fall into minor forms of *fawāḥish*. The transition from the first to the second group is also clearer in Ghazālī. (In Makkī it is a bit difficult to determine where his description of the first class ends and the second begins.) Ghazālī's extension of Makkī's fourfold schema demonstrates, as a case in point, that he was able to do for his Sufi predecessor what he is widely credited with doing for the philosophers: articulate their doctrines with a clarity and lucidity they were unable to do themselves.

Does *Tawba* Ever Come to an End?

Despite the practical concerns of the *Qūt*, a feature of the text we have repeatedly drawn attention to in the course of this chapter, a few of Makkī's analyses broach areas typically explored in greater detail in more advanced mystical texts. Near the end of his chapter, shortly before his classification of the seven sins that the aspirant must avoid, or, if committed, immediately repent of, he goes into a short discussion of the requirements of *tawba naṣūḥ*, the "sincere repentance" of Q 66:8. One cannot, for Makkī, stand among the ranks of the *tawwābīn* loved by God[106] without fulfilling these requirements. The ten conditions with which Makkī opened his chapter lead up to and in a sense culminate in this complementary list, the first nine of which summarize many of the themes he has explored in the chapter. The main intention behind these conditions is to ensure that the *tāʾib*'s abandonment of what he has left for God be total and uncompromising. The *tawbāt* or "repentances" for *tawba naṣūḥ*, after the *tāʾib* (1) abandons the sin, are that he

This content downloaded from 108.181.177.59 on Sat, 02 Aug 2025 23:58:00 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

must turn away from (2) speaking of the sin, (3) all of its causes, (4) whatever is similar to the sin, (5) thinking about what he has left, (6) listening to those who speak of it, (7) his aspiration for it (*al-himma bihi*), (8) his deficiencies in fulfilling the rights of repentance,[107] and (9) not completely desiring the face of God in his *tawba*.[108] These nine requirements are confined to the themes that he has explored, in greater and lesser detail, over the course of the chapter. Makkī in a sense reiterates the steps the *tāʾib* must take to turn away from the sin both externally and internally, outwardly and inwardly.

It is in the tenth condition however that he introduces a new theme—central to many Sufi explorations—of the never-ending cycle of *tawba*. Makkī states that the final requirement of the aspiring *tawwāb* is that he should repent of bringing his repentance to a close.[109] According to this last stipulation, the process of *tawba* should never reach an end. The reason for this, argues Makkī, is that even after the aspirant is able to turn away from the particular sin, or sins, he is still tainted by deficiencies and less perceptible faults in his return to God. Following his abandonment of the sin or vice, he should repent of his shortcomings in fulfilling what is demanded by the right of divine Lordship (*min taqṣīrihi ʿan al-qiyām bi ḥaqq al-rubūbiyya*), and then, of what is demanded by the reality of his vision or witnessing of God (*min taqṣīrihi ʿan al-qiyām bi ḥaqīqat mushāhadatihi*).[110] To put it less opaquely, let us recall that *tawba* has two dimensions: turning away from the sin, on the one hand, and turning toward God, on the other. It comprises an "aversion" and a complementary "conversion," or spiritual "inversion," in which one labors to shift his focus from the created realm to his Origin. Makkī states that even when one succeeds in turning away from his sin, he will still fall short in the second half of *tawba*, in his turn toward God and in his *mushāhada* of His magnificence. This is a higher stage of *tawba*, and one that can be realistically pursued only by one who is not tried by the more elementary sins that afflict the common lot of believers. But for those who have already left them, their focus should be on perfecting *tawba*, and this perfection is possible only when the *tāʾib* realizes that since *tawba* is an unending process, he can never fulfill the conditions of *tawba naṣūḥ*. Paradoxically, only when he realizes this fact, that he is never free of its demands, does he fulfill its requirements and become a *tawwāb*.

The underlying reason that the return to God through repentance is never ending, at least in this world, is because of the inability of the human being to attain moral and spiritual perfection. Although the sins

This content downloaded from 108.181.177.59 on Sat, 02 Aug 2025 23:58:00 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

that one turns away from become subtler and more difficult to detect as the aspirant matures on the path, they never disappear. No one is ever free of faults, not even the most advanced of Sufis. "For everything he witnesses other than God," says Makkī, "there is a sin, and in every rest he finds in other than Him, there is blame."[111] Even the mystic who is absorbed in his contemplation of God will have to turn in *tawba* from a contemplation that is less perfect to one that is more perfect. This is why Makkī says that ultimately "there is no end for the *tawba* of the gnostic" (*lā nihāya li tawbat al-ʿārif*).[112] Since even the prophets did not shy away from *tawba*, how, asks Makkī, can those who do not stand at the prophetic rank feel absolved of the obligation to repent? He writes:

> For every station there is a repentance, and for every state from among a station there is a repentance, and for every act of witnessing (*mushāhada*) and unveiling (*mukāshafa*) there is a repentance. This is the state of the *tāʾib munīb* who is drawn close (*muqarrab*) to God and loved by Him (ʿ*indahu ḥabīb*). This is the station of the one who is tried and oft-repenting (*muftan tawwāb*), meaning, tried and tested by things and yet oft-repenting (*tawwāb*) to God most High.[113]

On the basis of this passage, Makkī's position on the obligation to repent in all circumstances seems uncompromising. However, earlier in the chapter Makkī broaches a related subject, which we explored in some detail in chapter 5, where he takes a view that might appear to conflict, at least on the surface, with the position he takes above. In the debate that occurred in early Sufism as to whether *tawba* should entail never forgetting one's sin, or never remembering it, recall that Makkī acknowledged that the latter view represented a position more appropriate for advanced Sufis. He saw turning away from the remembrance of sins to engage in the remembrance of God to be a higher form of *tawba*, but not necessarily appropriate for novices. Thus, he argued (to return to an earlier passage):

> Some of them have said that the reality of repentance is that you [always] place the sin before your two eyes. Another group has said that the reality of repentance is that you forget your sin. These are the approaches of the two groups, and the states of the folk of the two stations. As for the remembrance of sins, the way of the aspirants and the state of the fearful

This content downloaded from 108.181.177.59 on Sat, 02 Aug 2025 23:58:00 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

> ones bring forth for them, through the remembrance of sins, perpetual grief and an inescapable fear. As for the forgetting of sins because one is preoccupied with the remembrance of God and what one puts forward by way of an increase in acts of worship, this is the way of the gnostics and the state of the lovers [of God]. Their goal is witnessing divine unity, and this is a station of knowing. The goal of the first group on the other hand is observing the boundaries and limits, and this is a station of propriety [. . . but . . .] the station of witnessing divine unity is superior, in the eyes of the gnostics, to observing propriety.[114]

If Makkī sees immersing oneself in the contemplation of God to be superior to remembering one's sins, then does his view that one must always strive to eliminate his shortcomings, regardless of the level of his mystical standing, lead to a contradiction, or at least a tension, in his views? It might, if we understand the second position to amount to an abandoning of repentance altogether, as many of the Sufis did who used Junayd's position to develop the concept of "repenting of repentance" (*tark al-tawba*). For these Sufis, forgetting one's sins because of one's absorption in the contemplation of God meant, essentially, that one had reached a stage at which he was no longer preoccupied either with himself or his faults. Since repentance necessitated giving attention to one's faults in order to turn away from them, forgetting one's faults meant, for these Sufis, also to forget one's *tawba*, or to abandon *tawba* altogether. Ibn al-ʿArabī argued that the *tāʾib* is in a state of distance from his divine origin because he is preoccupied with a return through *tawba*.[115] The *tāʾibūn*, he said, are the exiled ones because only those in a state of exile (*ḥāl al-ghurba*) strive to come back to their home. "There is no exile for the one who has returned to his family," wrote Ibn al-ʿArabī, "except for the absent one (*al-ghāʾib*), and the absent one is in exile, and the exiled ones are the *tāʾibūn*."[116] Sometimes this concept of *tark al-tawba* was also expressed through the idea of repenting of repentance, of *tawba al-tawba* or *al-tawba min al-tawba*, as in the case of the Andalusian Ibn al-ʿArīf (d. 1141), when he poetically declared, "many have repented, but no one has repented of repentance but I" (*qad tāba aqwām kathīr, wa mā tāba min al-tawba illā anā*).[117] Ruwaym (d. 915)[118] was perhaps one of the earliest Sufi figures to speak in such terms. For Sarrāj, his expression conveyed the fundamental import of Junayd's definition:

This content downloaded from 108.181.177.59 on Sat, 02 Aug 2025 23:58:00 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

> As for the response of Junayd, may God have mercy on him, that [*tawba* entails] one forget his sin, it refers to the *tawba* of the realized ones (*al-muḥaqqiqīn*) who do not recall their sins as a result of what has overcome their hearts of the Majesty of God, and of the persistence of their remembrance of Him. This is similar to [the response of] Ruwaym b. Ahmad, may God have mercy on him, when he was asked about *tawba* and said that it is *tawba* from *tawba* (*al-tawba min al-tawba*).[119]

Since to repent of something is to leave it, by drawing a parallel between Ruwaym's words and those of Junayd, Sarrāj saw that Junayd's definition of *tawba* could imply turning away from *tawba* altogether. It is true that many authorities, including Sarrāj, understand that *al-tawba min al-tawba* could also mean repenting of the deficiencies in one's repentance, which is to say, repenting of falling short in fulfilling its requirements. This, for example, is how Kalābādhī explained Ruwaym's words. He wrote that what Ruwaym meant was no different from Rābiʿa al-ʿAdawiyya when she said, "I seek forgiveness from my little sincerity in my saying, 'I seek forgiveness from God.' "[120] But although this later interpretation of *al-tawba min al-tawba* was common,[121] it did not necessarily preclude the first one. One could understand the expression in both senses, commensurate with the level of the mystic. There were figures who objected to the first interpretation, such as Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya (d. 1350) who vehemently opposed the idea of abandoning *tawba* altogether in his commentary on Anṣārī's own advice in the *Manāzil al-sāʾirīn* to "repent of repentance." "Repentance is among the greatest of good deeds," wrote Ibn al-Qayyim, "and to repent of good deeds is of the greatest of evil deeds, nay it is [outright] disbelief" (*bal huwa al-kufr*). Although he accepted the idea of *tawba min al-tawba*, what it meant for him is that the individual "repents from the shortcoming of repentance" (*nuqṣān al-tawba*).[122] What is significant for our purposes, however, is that numerous Sufi authorities interpreted Junayd's words to imply the possibility of leaving *tawba* at a certain level of mystic realization.

Despite these interpretations of Junayd, he himself did not explicitly speak of turning away from or abandoning *tawba* based on our sources. When he said that *tawba* is to forget one's sin, he simply defined the *tawba* of advanced mystics, but without stipulating that the mystic should ever leave *tawba* altogether. By preferring Junayd's definition of *tawba* for more realized individuals, Makkī does not necessarily contradict himself. The

This content downloaded from 108.181.177.59 on Sat, 02 Aug 2025 23:58:00 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

apparent inconsistency is based on an interpretation of Junayd's definition that is not necessarily forced upon us by his own words. It is not surprising that Makkī does not quote Ruwaym anywhere in his chapter on *tawba*. Since both Kalābādhī and Sarrāj in their own works, authored around the same time as the *Qūt*, cite Ruwaym's words in their much shorter chapters on *tawba*, we can presume that Makkī, though familiar with his expression, wished to avoid any confusion quoting him might create in the minds of his readers.

Finally, Makkī's insistence on the never-ending process of *tawba* should not be seen as a pietistic attempt to defend a scriptural and prophetic mandate. It is also rooted in a particular conception of the mystic journey that understands the journey to God as infinite, without a terminal point. As long as the path is understood in such terms, the need for constant *tawba* makes complete sense. It is only when one presumes that the journey can be completed in this world, in a state of permanent mystical annihilation or "arrival" (*wuṣūl*), can one see the rationale behind turning away from repentance altogether. The origin of the problem of whether *tawba* can ever come to an end thus rests on how one understands the nature of the mystic goal.

To summarize the results of our analysis of Makkī's treatment of *tawba*, it is, as we have seen, first and foremost directed at the practical needs of the spiritual aspirant. To this end he stipulates a number of requirements necessary in order for repentance to be sound and therefore acceptable to God. *Tawba* is obligatory for all sins because without it the sinner stands in the perilous state of potentially facing the consequences of his misdeeds in the form of divine punishment. Unless God decides to forgive his offenses through an act of Mercy, *tawba* remains the only way to escape such a consequence. The requirements of *tawba*, as we have also seen, are both external and internal. Externally, the *tā'ib* is called to avoid those circumstances that might tempt him to repeat the offense, while internally he must strive to eradicate the impulses that attract him to the sin. Moreover, he must feel regret for his wrong, strive to rectify his past mistake, and follow the misdeed with pious acts as a display of the seriousness of his commitment to *tawba*. The entire process is taxing and laborious, and calls for patience, struggle, and beseeching divine help. We can better appreciate how Makkī unifies and inter-relates the virtues within his mystical psychology by observing how the process of

This content downloaded from 108.181.177.59 on Sat, 02 Aug 2025 23:58:00 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

repentance integrates these other key virtues. Although Makkī briefly touches on themes dealt with in greater detail in more advanced mystical texts, his primary focus, as we have seen, is to provide the aspirant with a manual through which he can take concrete steps to return to his own origin in God.

This content downloaded from 108.181.177.59 on Sat, 02 Aug 2025 23:58:00 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

This content downloaded from 108.181.177.59 on Sat, 02 Aug 2025 23:58:00 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms